

# UC San Diego

## UC San Diego Electronic Theses and Dissertations

### Title

Space Travel, or: Lessons in Critical Distance

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1c13x4ng>

### Author

Farnsworth, Sarah Ruth

### Publication Date

2019

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Space Travel, or: Lessons in Critical Distance

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Sarah Ruth Farnsworth

Committee in charge:

Professor Brian Cross, Chair  
Professor Norman Bryson, Co-Chair  
Professor Alain Cohen  
Professor Ricardo Dominguez

2019

©  
Sarah Ruth Farnsworth, 2019  
All rights reserved.

The Thesis of Sarah Ruth Farnsworth is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

---

---

---

---

Co-Chair

---

Chair

University of California San Diego

2019

## DEDICATION

There are many people to thank, but first and foremost is my advising committee, who has stuck with me through thick and thin and put up with a lot of my bullshit over the past three years. Countless meetings, babbling, blathering, long-winded e-mails, and occasional breakthroughs. Thank you, thank you, thank you:

Professor Norman Bryson  
Professor Alain Cohen  
Professor Brian Cross  
Professor Ricardo Dominguez

I then would like to thank members of my visual arts cohort and program-at-large, to whom I am eternally grateful. What a little family we have created over the past few years! I am honored to have shared this time with you, exchanged ideas, clinked glasses, and likely spilled tea in your studio. I would especially like to thank the following people, who have been instrumental in my own growth as an artist:

Jessica Buie  
Dillon Chapman  
Allison Evans  
Tanner Gilliland-Swetland  
Grace Huddleston  
Maya Misra  
Maya VanderSchuit  
Paolo Zuñiga

I would also like to thank the following people for their continued support and belief in my work:

Steve Bird  
Lucas Coffin  
Professor Teddy Cruz  
Kate Edwards  
Professor Anya Gallaccio  
Lorena Gomez Mostajo  
Tad Linfesty  
Professor Rubén Ortiz Torres

I could not have done any of this without the support of my parents, Deborah and Geoffrey Farnsworth, who encourage me each day and continue to inspire me.

Finally, I would like to thank Cole Goodwin, who has been my best friend, sounding board, and biggest fan since the day I badgered him in Teddy's class our very first quarter. Thank you for everything.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page.....	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
List of Figures .....	vi
Abstract of the Thesis .....	vii
Part 1: <i>Space Travel, or: Lessons in Critical Distance</i> .....	1
Part 2: <i>Color Processing and Other Emotional Endeavors</i> .....	12
Works Cited.....	34

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: A diagram of ergonomic design .....	13
Figure 2: Page spread from Larry Clark's <i>Tulsa</i> .....	16
Figure 3: Nan Goldin - Nan After Being Battered, 1984, from <i>The Ballad of Sexual Dependency</i> .....	21
Figure 4: Cindy Sherman - Untitled Film Still #30, from series <i>Untitled Film Stills</i> .....	22
Figure 5: William Eggleston - Greenwood, Mississippi, from <i>William Eggleston's Guide</i> .....	26
Figure 6: Nan Goldin - Suzanne with Mona Lisa, Mexico City, from <i>The Ballad of Sexual Dependency</i> .....	26
Figure 7: William Eggleston - Untitled Confederate Flag, Tennessee, 1973.....	27
Figure 8: Cover of John Berger's <i>Portraits</i> .....	32

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Space Travel,  
or: Lessons in Critical Distance

by

Sarah Ruth Farnsworth

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2019

Professor Brian Cross, Chair  
Professor Norman Bryson, Co-Chair

*Space Travel, or: Lessons in Critical Distance* by Sarah Ruth Farnsworth is an exploration of color, space and emotion as experienced on the highways of the American Southwest. This project spans one year and four states, resulting in a book of photographs and text, as well as an accompanying photographic exhibition.



Part I:

*Space Travel, or: Lessons in Critical Distance*

November 3, 2018. 8:16 PM - 8:27 PM PST

Salton City, CA. Sea and Sun Motel, Room 1

Today I photographed a dead dog on the side of the road and my stomach still churns from the smell, the flies wafting off its body as the cars pass, that and bad Ceviche from some restaurant in town. I'm in this motel in Salton City watching the Dodgers lose the World Series, and I never thought baseball moved me until that final inning with the crowd giving up and the flies wafting as the cars pass.

I don't actually know what the fuck I'm doing out in the middle of the desert sometimes. Maybe I'm just chasing a certain kind of light. Maybe I'm chasing my mother. She always tells me these stories of her and Dad in the old CJ5 just tearing shit up, falling in love. But my own narrative leaves me gawking at stuff on the side of the road.

Once a year, Mom and I head out to the Sierra Nevadas by way of the 395, which once extended into downtown San Diego, but now starts way up at Hesperia and cuts through the Mojave. Once you're on it you're on it and you go a few hundred miles before you turn onto Line Street and then you're up in the mountains for five days or so and then you head back down. Obviously I'm oversimplifying things. It's a six-hour drive from my parents' house and the minute we get onto Highway 395 my mom asks me how my life is going. The Mojave flying past. As a child, I committed the entire drive to memory, dog-eared the zones where the conversation tenses. This, the annual trip, for an annual drive to have this annual conversation, near-boiling in the desert heat.

My lover asked me today what I mean when I say *intimacy*, and for the sake of clarity I think it's important to define these sort of terms. In the case of my mother, it's the type of relationship where we have to completely vacate all other zones of our lives to really communicate with one another. Like two Francis Bacon paintings plunging motionless through nothing at ninety-two miles-per-hour, the highway a straight line we contort ourselves around. No cell service. And it's within this thin membrane of steel – all cramped up for hours, the Eastern shore of California crashing over the windshield – that we continue to find something real within each other again and again.

But I have yet to give a proper answer to the person lying next to me. It's almost too windy to think and the TV is buzzing. Earlier I went on a walk in the neighborhood surrounding the motel to get some air and found this trampoline I think I might photograph. I saw myself as a kid in Temecula jumping up and down in pigtails – there was an ant hill underneath full of fire ants and I would try to spit on it through the mesh. Polypropylene burning my skin as I lie prone in the sun. I roll over to my lover and he asks me how my stomach is. But I don't respond. The sun has burned a hole straight through – I curl up and let my organs slide out to make a space for him. Is this intimacy?

The walls of this motel are thin and this works in both directions. The sex is loud and yes, pull my fucking hair. Let this whole arid town experience my rather internal sensations. Meanwhile, I haven't shit in two days because god forbid I vocalize a real interiority. Kundera understands the conundrum I face and subjects Teresa to it ruthlessly. The soul: wanting to eject itself from the body: needing the body to propel. The body: turned inside-out by the soul's excitability: mortified by itself. Teresa fucks a stranger silently then shits in his toilet. I will wait until tomorrow when we stop to get gas.

(But the light in the bathroom is lovely, we can both agree on that.)

Tomorrow we'll go driving, much like today. There's no site or destination, just the infinite potential for distraction, the car like those jellyfish that follow the arc of the sun. I wrote a paper on them once, the golden jellyfish. They're specific to this lake in the middle of an island. Honestly, I forget most of the details. Only the asymptotic pathway they take against the light. Ours is a more free-associative journey, but perhaps still ruled by photosynthesis.

It was on one of these drives where my mother told me that taking courses in marine biology made her decide to be an analyst. Layers and all that. But we're inland, here. When I see a sign for a lake, I assume it's a dry lake.

August 14, 2018. 7:42 AM - 7:53 AM PST

West Wendover, NV. Wendover Nugget, Golden Harvest Cafe

I woke up late and Dad has left without me. I will have to walk to the raceway from here. We have a room for the week on the fourth floor of a casino which lies on the border between Nevada and Utah and I keep gaining and losing time between the two. Waiting for the check and admittedly hungover from last night's cognac and pay-per-view, but this coffee is getting me nowhere. I just keep watching the keno numbers flashing on a grid.

The time trials have begun – in fact, in Mountain Standard Time they are quite well on their way. I'll have to walk about two miles East, away from the casinos and beyond the pawn shops, onto the Bonneville Salt Flats. This landscape is a monochrome, a Rauschenberg. From space, one could record the atmospheric changes on its surface. A surface which has no give, only take. It's 96 degrees and once I'm out there my sweat too will dissolve and give back to the ocean of speed.

Forty-seven years ago the Blue Flame rocket car set the land speed record, the first vehicle to travel over one thousand kilometers per hour. It took thirteen years for another vehicle to beat this record, but the Blue Flame was the last one timed at Bonneville. My uncle Pete swears the car could have gone faster had they run it again, but now it's sitting in some museum in Germany. Pete has the spare tire for the car since he designed it. Or that's the story I hear at least. In our house there are only pinewood derby replicas my brother made in Scouts.

My dad just turned seventy and had never been out here before now. I'm starting to notice his age. Growing up he was always salt and pepper but now he's gone completely

white. We've driven eight hundred miles in the Jeep over the past four days, leaving on Friday with the hope of getting up here a day early to camp at Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels*. I got four nights at the casino, which would have started tonight until Pete called us and told us that there was practically no point to being there past the first days of Speed Week – that the real action was on Sunday, and I wasted six hundred dollars in hotel bills for nothing. Dad freaked and we decided to drive an extra hundred fifty miles to get there by Saturday, stopping in Elko, Nevada the first night. Six hundred and ninety-two miles. Even then we hoped to camp. But once we made our way through Nancy Holt's directions – *about eight miles past the state line is a sign for Lucin, an empty town with no remaining buildings – bear right at the unmarked fork in the road, cross the railroad tracks, and continue on the same road for about two miles* – we got there and I forgot to pack the tent pegs. I freaked and Dad convinced the casino to start our reservation early.

This isn't the first time this has happened, a tent-related breakdown. The last time was ten years ago at the Sonoma Grand Prix, an Indy Car race in Northern California. The idea is you wake up next to the track to the sound of engines revving with last night's cognac and car fumes in the air. I was living in San Francisco and Dad picked me up in the Jeep and when we got there it was already dark.

Setting up by flashlight in the wind. No tent pegs. Somehow we managed to get to the Big 5 in Vallejo two minutes before it closed.

Our run to Vallejo could be conceived of as a time trial: a race against the clock. Everything at Speed Week is exactly this but formalized. Each vehicle goes in a straight line and gets timed at various markers. If you manage to beat a time in your vehicle class, you must match or

better it a second time, just to prove your mettle. Do that and it's a record, though I'm not sure where it's posted.

Clocking in at six hundred twenty-two point four zero five miles per hour, the Blue Flame broke a record. It could have done our entire drive on Friday in a little over an hour. Hypothetically. The engine was effectively broken after a few trial runs, each lasting less than a minute over five miles. These numbers aren't real. A bunch of old guys come out here with earplugs and watch the push cars get the rocket cars up to speed and then the rocket cars take off for a few miles, too far and too fast to really see. These machines are best marveled at in stillness, as statues, as testaments of something on a pure white pedestal.

I too am drawn to the stillness. I keep tracing out the tire treads carved black into the flats. It's Rauschenberg all over again, with John Cage as the driver. I've heard drivers of these rocket cars describe the experience as time slowing to a crawl, the landscape growing thick around the vehicle. The ceaseless white of the sea bed unfolds beneath you like the clouds on an airplane. At this point, is there really a driver? Or are we all passengers to a new kind of nature in motion?

June 3, 2018. 1:38 PM - 1:56 PM MST

Quartzsite, AZ. Yacht Club, African Queen

It's 116 degrees outside and I need to wait a while before I go out again. I left a can of Coke in the Jeep for an hour; when I came back, the thing had exploded. Whole top popped right off. It reminded me of a time back in Temecula when my brother took a can opener to a Mountain Dew – I used to call it Green Coke. Big mess. Shot straight up into the air. Green Coke everywhere.

Today it was a Diet Coke, and God had the can opener.

Quartzsite, Arizona is pretty empty this time of year, maybe a thousand people. Feels like less. I don't have a good conception of these things though, honestly. When we had to guess the number of marbles in the jar as a kid I was always way off. Not that many people. But in the Winter, Quartzsite has all these big rock conventions, gem shows, that sort of thing. Swells the whole place up to a hundred thousand people. And it's this capacity for a town to expand and contract to such a degree that drew me out here in the first place.

Most stores are closed, but not boarded up. Still breathing, just asleep. There's a big shop called the Roadrunner Market that still has its outside lights on with a sign that says *Welcome Winter Visitors!* Snowbirds. My brother gets them in his store in Phoenix, which is less than two hours away but I refuse to tell him I'm out here. I haven't visited him since he's bought a house in Arizona, but now's not the weekend. This weekend I'm staying in the only lodging still open in Quartzsite, The Yacht Club, which is actually a plot of mobile homes. Since I was the only patron, the manager gave me the pick of the litter, and I chose the one called the African Queen. It's nice. Full of photos of Humphrey Bogart and Katherine



Hepburn. Little factoids framed on the wall. *Did you know? While filming The African Queen everyone fell sick from drinking the water except for Humphrey Bogart and John Huston, who drank whiskey.* I read them whenever it gets too hot to go outside.

When it's not too hot I go driving, mostly in circles around the main road loop. I don't know what I'm searching for, exactly. Yesterday I saw this sea of RV hook-ups, all empty. It looked like the *Lightning Fields* without the cachet, and somehow I too found myself magnetically grounded here.

There's one little restaurant off the main road where I had dinner last night. A man came in, ordered a French Dip and a large glass of water, and told me his life story. He is a pilot, but his primary love is his motorcycle. He bought it after his marriage fell apart. That was two years ago. Two months ago he got his motorcycle tattooed across his chest. He started in Chicago, and is on his way to San Diego where he'll pick up a few flights before landing, turning his bike around, and heading back. Yesterday he was in Monument Valley. It was so hot today he thought he was going to die, until he saw Quartzsite in the distance, and it convinced him to hold on. He told me it was glowing like a beacon of light. Then he finished his water and left.

January 26, 2019. 7:56 PM – 8:02 PM PST

Bishop, California. Thunderbird Motel, Room 27

Four hours ago my lover told me to turn around, to go back a mile or a ways at least to the turn-off for Badwater Basin, where he swore he saw a tree with a bag stuck in it that looked like Frida Kahlo. I of course saw no such thing. I had reached that point in the drive where I had lost any reason for continuing other than that it didn't feel right to stop. Not but one hour earlier I realized I had been shooting my camera all morning without any film loaded in it. I was still going through the internal slideshow of images I shot but failed to record when I heard his voice. And what the hell, why not. Frida Kahlo. Closest thing to portraiture I'd have done in a while.

Growing up, my mother was the photographer in the family. She shot a Nikon with a 50mm lens. There are photos of my brother, my father, me. In front of the Grand Canyon. In the car. In the mountains. In the desert. None of her. But sometimes her presence. Sometimes her shadow was on the ground. Sometimes her finger was over the lens. Sometimes you could just tell in the look my father gave. I always wanted to do portraits.

At some point I began taking this whole photography thing more seriously, but after all this time she still won't let me photograph her. She's not comfortable in front of the lens. But neither am I. Now we're both missing from the archives except in shadows and traces.

There's only one exception to this I've committed to film: a snap of her in the High Sierra mountains, the ones up a ways off Line Street here in Bishop: the scrawniest little picture from a Nikon from the seventies, and with this wide-angle lens you couldn't find her if

you tried. She actually stood there for five hundredths of a second. But not a hundredth more. That was thirteen years ago.

I started out this morning driving my lover up Line Street with a Nikon I thought I had loaded. But the pass is closed in Winter and we didn't make it far. Nine thousand feet or so. But by the time he saw the tree and told me to turn around we were two hundred feet below sea level. The bag looked nothing like Frida Kahlo, but I took her portrait anyway.

I wonder where that negative is. Certainly I wouldn't want the only document I have made of my mother to exist solely as the four-by-six copy I got at the drug store. But maybe she would.

Part II:

*Color Processing and Other Emotional Endeavors*

Walead Beshty told me that landscape inherently evokes colonialism.<sup>1</sup> He said this in reference to an earlier draft of my book, which was laid out in the same dimensions of William Eggleston's *Guide*.<sup>2</sup> I had no plans to keep it this way, but I wanted to see my images against a format that worked.

The layout in question: 108 pages with some filler front and back, 9.5 inches by 9.2 inches – just off square. Foreground-heavy image as the cover shot, which sits top-weighted in a hardcover binding. One can appreciate the success of its design in this crude illustration Amazon provides for certain products:

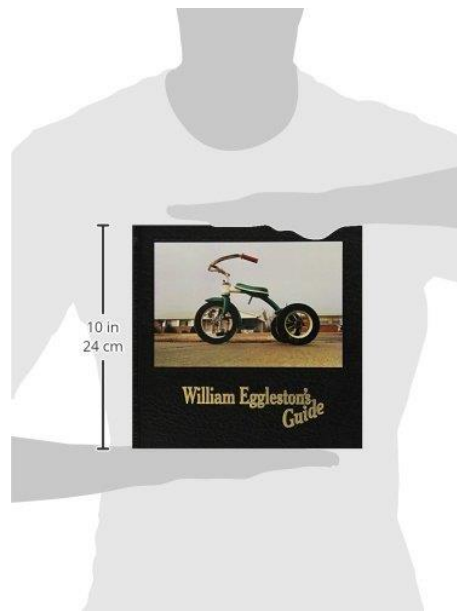


Figure 1: A diagram of ergonomic design

---

<sup>1</sup> Artist, critical theorist, and asshole I met in January 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Eggleston, William. *William Eggleston's Guide*. (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 1976).

The weight (less than two pounds) and handling of the book are accessible and ergonomic, much like the subject matter of the cover image. Yet the hard black cover, gold leaf titling, and extreme perspective of the shot demand the series to be taken seriously as a work. It's tactical, if perhaps a little severe.

Immediately upon opening the cover, however, the severity of the black binding is softened by 16 pages of mossy green paper, coarser than standard photo paper – just a notch above construction paper – which houses the title page as well as John Szarkowski's preface. I marvel at this paper choice whenever returning to the *Guide*. It's matte, it's opaque. It's pastel, for Christ's sake. It evokes nothing of the photographic medium. But it does evoke color, which was new for photography in 1976. At least in an artistic sense. In some ways, the preface feels like a visual lubricant for the reader, a courtesy step for what's to come.

Once inside, it's slow. One image per spread, always on the right. Brief caption on the left. Each one varies in specificity. On page 22, the caption reads *Memphis*.<sup>3</sup> On page 30, *Sumner, Mississippi, Cassidy Bayou in background*.<sup>4</sup> Each image is taken from a 35 millimeter Leica, but they don't all sit on the same spot of the page. The change can best be described as a bobble -- landscape-oriented pictures bobbing gradually up and down; portraits side to side. The feeling is oceanic, and appeals to a logic of color and line. I looked to John Szarkowski for answers, but was left disappointed. What I did find, however, was a disturbing account of Eggleston's compositional strategy:

---

<sup>3</sup> Eggleston, 22.

<sup>4</sup> Eggleston, 30.

The simplicity of these pictures is (as the reader will have guessed) not so simple. When Alfred H. Barr, Jr., first saw a selection of slides from this series in 1972 he observed -- surprisingly but in fact accurately -- that the design of most of the pictures seemed to radiate from a central, circular core. In time the observation was relayed to Eggleston, who replied, after a barely perceptible hesitation, that this was true, since the pictures were based compositionally on the Confederate flag -- not the asterisk, or the common daisy, or the dove of the Holy Ghost, but the Confederate flag. The response was presumably improvised and unresponsive, of interest only as an illustration of the lengths to which artists sometimes go to frustrate rational analysis of their work, as though they fear it might prove an antidote to their magic.<sup>5</sup>

Szarkowski goes onto dismiss this sordid notion and return to the importance of color.

- - -

I find myself wondering why my host of artistic and intellectual idols are more often than not men whose actions I distrust. Where do I fit in with all of them? What can be gained?

- - -

It's not like I was unaware of other models. I could have chosen something else that *worked*. Even something whose themes aligned with my own. I could have gone with Nan Goldin's *Ballad of Sexual Dependency*.<sup>6</sup> Now there's a book that works -- a book which "incorporates extraordinary subjectivity and intimacy" says the Museum of Contemporary

---

<sup>5</sup> John Szarkowski, foreword to *William Eggleston's Guide* (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 1976), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Goldin, Nan. *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. Edited by Marvin Heiferman, Mark Holborn, and Suzanne Fletcher. (New York, NY: Aperture Foundation, 1986).

Art.<sup>7</sup> Two themes I tackle constantly! In fact, a moment of tremendous tension – if not potential breakthrough – with an advisor revolved around a suggestion that I had intimacy issues based on the way I photograph inanimate objects.

Goldin's subjects, by contrast, are never inanimate; that is, until they reach the viewer. One reads *Ballad* as a mausoleum in the wake of the AIDS crisis. While Larry Clark's *Tulsa*<sup>8</sup> – published fifteen years earlier – literally spells out his youthful subjects' deaths in a climactic buildup of drug use and derangement, Goldin's *Ballad* doesn't have to. You just know.

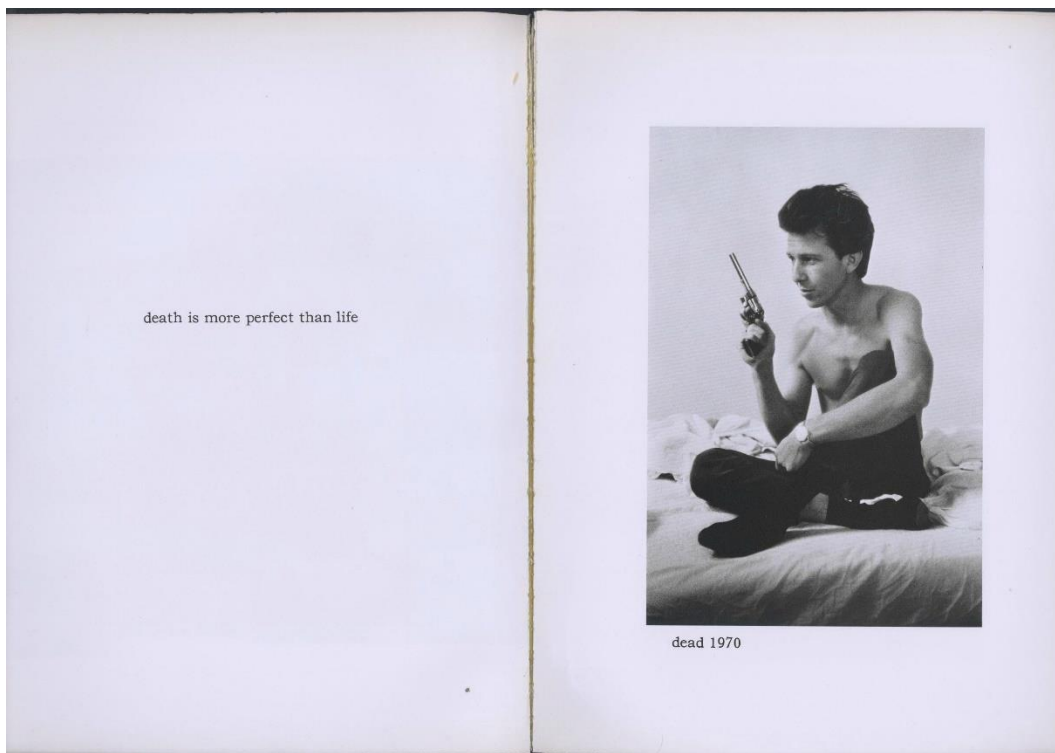


Figure 2: Page spread from Larry Clark's photobook *Tulsa*

---

<sup>7</sup> "Nan Goldin: The Ballad of Sexual Dependency." The Museum of Contemporary Art. <https://www.moca.org/exhibition/nan-goldin-the-ballad-of-sexual-dependency>.

<sup>8</sup> Clark, Larry. *Tulsa*. (New York, NY: Lustrum Press, 1971).



- - -

Isn't that Barthes' argument?<sup>9</sup> That every photograph proves the defeat of time – the ultimate wound, or *punctum*, of the image? "What *pricks* me," he writes, "is the discovery of this equivalence. In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder, like Winnicott's psychotic patient, *over a catastrophe which has already occurred*. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe".<sup>10</sup>

When I first read *Camera Lucida*, I was so floored by the notion of a photograph being a deathmask that I pretty much blew through the nuances of this statement. The reference to Winnicott, for instance, went straight over my head. But Barthes' use of Winnicott's theory here has been a crucial link in my own practice.

He's referring to Winnicott's 1974 essay, *Fear of Breakdown*.<sup>11</sup> The text is short; I could quote its entirety and still not make the word-count. And on the subject of death, this essay was published – like *Camera Lucida* – shortly before its author's death. Essentially, the *Fear of Breakdown* speaks of an anxiety cast into the future that actually derives from an agony already experienced. According to Winnicott, "the original experience of primitive agony cannot get into the past tense unless the ego can first gather it into its own present time experience and into omnipotent control now".<sup>12</sup>

(It was actually my mother who first sent me this text. She was teaching a seminar on Winnicott and I inquired. There are so many avenues of psychoanalytic theory, but I hadn't

---

<sup>9</sup> Referring to Roland Barthes, theorist, semiotician and famed Scorpio.

<sup>10</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1981), 96.

<sup>11</sup> Winnicott, Donald Woods. "Fear of Breakdown." *International Review of Psycho-analysis* 1 (1974): 103-07.

<sup>12</sup> Winnicott, 105.

made it far past Freud's greatest hits. She recommended his writing because of its accessibility – naturally, I took offense at the implication that I needed *accessible* writers; that is, until I tried to read Wilfred Bion's *Transformations* and was captivated by its density.<sup>13</sup>)

The connection Barthes makes to this essay extends beyond the deathmask: photography is linked inherently to *trauma*, and the *processing* of that trauma.

*Fear of Breakdown* cropped up again in my first year of graduate school, when it was referenced in yet another text, Emmanuel Ghent's 1990 essay *Masochism, Submission, Surrender*.<sup>14</sup> I found myself in a relationship that had a different flavor than those I had experienced in the past, and was struggling to understand it, or identify my own position within it. I needed a vocabulary. Now, I understand this relationship to be one of abuse: physical, sexual, and psychological: which cast a shadow on the majority of my time in this institution. But at that moment, I just had a Polaroid of my ass that was bruised black from being spanked two days prior. I was excited, and unaware of the trajectory this all was headed.

Thus *masochism* was my first attempt at contextualizing these experiences. This was a good lead, albeit a false one. Certainly I liked the argument Ghent makes: that sexual masochism – what Ghent refers to as *surrender* – is an act of finding oneself, of being known to another, of dissolving oneself into other.<sup>15</sup> That sounds nice, doesn't it? I could get down with that hypothetically. And then there's Deleuze, who argues that masochism hinges entirely

---

<sup>13</sup> Bion, Wilfred R. *Transformations: Change from Learning to Growth*. New York, NY: Basic Books Publishing Company, 1965.

<sup>14</sup> Ghent, Emmanuel, MD. "Masochism, Submission, Surrender1—Masochism as a Perversion of Surrender." *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 26 (1990): 108-36.

<sup>15</sup> Ghent, 110-112.

on the contract.<sup>1617</sup> It's thrilling in the way that bureaucracy is: filling out forms and waiting, waiting, waiting anxiously for a reply.

As I said, I don't regret this avenue of thought. After all, I enjoyed that bruise on my ass. I enjoyed it as a durational experience, and I enjoyed its transformation into an image on my skin. The bruise went through its own process of recording, developing, and affixing itself for weeks. I watched it emerge in the mirror with the same vain excitement of watching an image emerge through emulsion under red light. To some, this photo, and such a tiny photo at that, would prove to be an omen for the relationship that followed; a catastrophe that, by the time I showed it, had already occurred. I took it not knowing the future, only knowing that I needed to process an event.

I don't know if this makes me a masochist, but that's not really the issue. What was clear was that as things became worse in my relationship, my own sense of agency fell short of Ghent's ideal. It sure as hell fell short of Deleuze's.

I found the right vocabulary in the process of creating my second-year show, *Collaborative Mark-making*. Transforming unvoiced feelings into action gave me agency, and I flipped the script. My abuser became my assistant. The project was a series of large-scale sheets of chromogenic paper, exposed to light at an angle. He – who insisted on remaining nameless – held the paper out away from his body while I exposed it to light. Depending on how long the paper was, this task in of itself was difficult. The first batch of prints were made as close to his height as was possible to render in pitch-darkness. Later, I doubled the length.

---

<sup>16</sup> Referring to Gilles Deleuze, theorist and classic grad school name-drop. Capricorn.

<sup>17</sup> Deleuze, Gilles. *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*. (New York, NY: G. Braziller, 1971).

The results were large, wrinkled, bruise-like. I displayed them with my Polaroid. My assistant dumped me after the show.

- - -

Let's return to *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*:

Goldin's photobook is laid out in a way that evokes its origins as a slideshow. The viewer flips through it at the same 4/4 cadence as the songs that once accompanied the images, projected first onto the walls of nightclubs and eventually onto those of the 1985 Whitney Biennial. The images sit large on each page, with little border space and few pauses, save for the occasional heavy moment which requires time for digestion. One such moment lies between *Brian's Face, West Berlin, 1984* and *Nan After Being Battered, 1984*, suggesting a causal relationship and perhaps speaking to the title of the series.



Figure 3: Nan Goldin - *Nan After Being Battered, 1984*, from *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*

*Nan After Being Battered, 1984*. Taken one month after the titular Event. I wonder if she watched her skin with the same excitement as I did. I don't know if it's possible not to, as a photographer.

I can't help but think about this image in relation to Cindy Sherman. Sherman's *Untitled Film Still #30* is essentially this same photograph, only it's in black and white and completely artificial.<sup>18</sup> For Amelia Jones, the *punctum* of Sherman's self-portrait is the shine of the lip.<sup>19</sup> For me, the same could be said for Goldin's. But they're doing different things, playing different games. *Untitled #30* speaks to a larger issue of women being portrayed in media. The battered woman is a trope, it's overplayed. It's limiting. I don't think *Nan After Being Battered* has an argument.



Figure 4: Cindy Sherman - *Untitled Film Still #30*, from series *Untitled Film Stills*

---

<sup>18</sup> From Cindy Sherman's larger photographic series of *Untitled Film Stills* created between 1977-1980.

<sup>19</sup> Jones, Amelia. "The "Eternal Return": Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment Signs." *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27, no. 4 (2002), 961.

In looking at these images, I feel myself letting down a legacy of women who use and have used the medium of photography to say something clearly, whether declarative or persuasive. While *Collaborative Mark-making* was a personal breakthrough, a process of searching and (eventually) discovering, it was not a megaphone for womankind. In the thick of the #MeToo movement, I find myself reluctant to take my place and wear a pussy hat, despite my mother's prodding. *Finally*, someone said to me my first year in this program, *a woman artist who's not a feminist*. A statement meant to be a compliment, which frustrated me to no end – and yet, there may be some truth to it. The fact does not escape me that I've all but completely avoided female faculty. Not for lack of merit, but perhaps due to a mutual disconnect.

I actually consider myself to be quite an emotional person. I know how to have a good cry. But perhaps it's that I'm a Virgo, or that I've undergone nearly a decade of psychoanalysis, it seems that my version of processing is rather quiet, private and severe.<sup>20</sup> I'm known to be blunt, but that in of itself can obfuscate the issue. I can say I've been raped without flinching, for example.

When he left me, my response was to drive six hours alone and stay in Vegas for a week alone and photograph houses and cars alone. It was liberating in a profoundly depressive sort of way. I had no plan except to drive around and shoot, record any and all conversation, and write. When I got there I began collecting all the escort cards I found lying on the ground, fantasizing about the daily lives of the women depicted: the foods they ate, the people they fucked, the people they loved. I was especially fond of Karly, whose card said she

---

<sup>20</sup> Virgo in Sun, Mercury and Venus. Moon in Cancer. Capricorn Rising.

was on sale for \$35. Her skin was egregiously tan. She wore blue. She looked like Las Vegas. I kept her card in my wallet for months.

When Karly and I came back, my hope was to make a book of the images and ephemera, a book which naturally became the major project of the remainder of my time in graduate school. Yet my trip to Vegas was the only trip not included in the final product. I was in a place of hate, which I apparently took out on the medium of photography; the images are so bleak that I struggle to look at them now.

But this was the trip where I began to examine my own habits, especially alone. I would go on two more trips alone the following year. Alone, I will drive around for hours on end looking for something to shoot. I do not mind oppressive heat, and prefer to shoot in direct sunlight. There are multiple reasons for this. One is that I am reluctant to walk around with equipment at night. Another is that direct sunlight complements my shooting style, which is often rather straight-on. It's deadpan and objective, in an almost stupid way. Everything is fairly centered, and I'm not afraid to use obvious lines in the frame to help me keep things level. This has been called at times *intensely unemotional, analytical, rejecting*. I base it off of Eggleston, who does the same damn thing. I'm not sure if it's even my job to make things emotional for the viewer. I prefer Barthes' notion of the photograph: a child pointing his finger at something and saying *Look, see, here it is!*<sup>21</sup> This may explain my love for the *New Topographics* movement in general: which was championed by Szarkowski: which is known for a certain, shall we say, banality.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Barthes, 5

<sup>22</sup> A 1975 exhibition titled *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, curated by John Szarkowski. The original exhibition included the following ten photographers: Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore, and Henry Wessel.



If I'm being honest, it's the only reason I love this photograph by Goldin. It's straight-on. It's boring. In some ways it is her least emotional work. It shares a same *circular core* to Eggleston's, minus his Confederate leanings. Much of Goldin's work tends to exploit her subjects, capitalizing on their state of decline and emphasizing the inherent power dynamics I struggle with in portraiture. But her self-portrait's compositional matter-of-factness, harsh flash and landscape orientation flattens out any semblance of pathos. Even the title bears this same horizontality.

That, and the color. That drugstore saturation of Kodachrome slide film.<sup>23</sup> Goldin and Eggleston both shoot the same film, and are drawn to the same reds.

---

<sup>23</sup> Also loved by Paul Simon. Discontinued in 2010, in the thick of my undergraduate degree in Photography.



Figure 5: William Eggleston - Greenwood, Mississippi, from *William Eggleston's Guide*



Figure 6: Nan Goldin - Suzanne with Mona Lisa, Mexico City, from *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*



Figure 7: William Eggleston - Untitled Confederate Flag, Tennessee, 1973

Reduced to monochrome, Eggleston's designs would be in fact almost static, almost as blandly resolved as the patterns seen in kaleidoscopes, but they are perceived in color, where the wedge of purple necktie, or the real disk of the stoplight against the sky, has a different compositional torque than its equivalent panchromatic gray, as well as a different meaning. For Eggleston, who was perhaps never fully committed to photography in black and white, the lesson would be more easily and naturally learned, enabling him to make these pictures: real photographs, but lifted from the visceral world with such tact and cunning that they seem true, seen in color from corner to corner.<sup>24</sup>

Reduced to monochrome, Goldin's work suffers a similar fate. It's bad hair, bad curtains, costume jewelry. I'm confronted by the eighties more than I am the brutality of the image. In color, both factors have a voice. I need her lips to be cartoonishly red, like the color of her left eye. Otherwise, it's simply not a photograph worth looking at.

---

<sup>24</sup> John Szarkowski, foreword to *William Eggleston's Guide* (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 1976), 12.

- - -

I came into this program determined to do two things: to make a book and to understand color. I had certainly shot in color, but I hadn't before sat with my negatives and really tried to figure them out. I hadn't *printed* color, which was a limitation in my own practice as well as in my reading of other artists' works.

*Collaborative Mark-making* initially began from the humble desire to understand how chromogenic photographic paper functioned in of itself, before the influence of a negative. I first created a series of maquettes which were exposed to different ratios of cyan, magenta and yellow light. Next, I tested a variety of angles the paper could sit in relation to the light source during exposure, and found that the vibrance changed greatly when the source of light was indirect. Everything was recorded in a log -- it was all rather clinical, really. They were studies. I included some of these studies in my First Year Review, which were received *as art objects* with mixed results. It was when I expanded the process into a large-scale show that I learned the charge that color carries.

In many ways, my thesis work, titled *Space Travel, or: Lessons in Critical Distance*, also fits the description of a color study, though less clinical in execution. There's a certain hue of blue that spans the desert skies of the American Southwest. Fifty-five hundred degrees Kelvin sort of blue, where everything is brutal and hot and color-corrected. This blue lasts all Summer, like an atmospheric superbloom. I found it everywhere I went.

The Winter sky is white, but not as white as the white of the salt flats, which is a blinding white, a matte white, with an entirely different visual texture to snow. Winter in the desert is off-white, and seems to skip midday – it's six AM until it's four PM until it's midnight, then it's black.

Certain colors repeat themselves – I found Karly's fake tan, for instance, in the dirt of four states. But red is nowhere to be found, save for billboards, cars and trash. It's a highway color, imported from the cities.

Red is one of the easier colors to print, since its associations are more specific – branded, even. The color is as static as it is vibrant. I look down at a McDonalds french fry box on the side of the road, and it's the same color in my mind's eye four months later in the darkroom. Not all colors are this stubborn. I look down at a dead dog on the side of the road in November minutes before the sun set, but six months later my memory of this moment has slid around, both in color temperature and my emotions toward them. There's a fleck of green present in my image – is this the glare from early evening? an impurity of processing? or my own nausea seeping into the emulsion? My guess is it's D: all of the above: which I believe even if it's wrong. I'm learning to navigate the ever-slight gap between *being* right and *feeling* right, which goes beyond color theory and enters the realm of psychology.

- - -

My advisor asks if my practice is therapeutic – a question not meant to be a compliment. There's a grimace in there, there's the silhouette of a broken woman formed in the haze of such an accusation. But of course it's therapeutic. It's psychoanalytic in form. It's a multi-stage act of processing.

There was a period of time I couldn't get myself to print at all. I was determined to travel, determined to shoot – as if the act of advancing film through the camera would bring me answers to a series of unasked questions. I was in Quartzsite, Arizona. It was June. It was

hot. I was reading *The Story of O*, yet another, more egregious attempt to find my likeness in a character taking ownership of the abuse to which she is subjected.<sup>25</sup> Once again off the mark. I found myself more crucially in the heat, and in the circling futility of trying to photograph this town I drove 250 miles out to on a whim. All the things I felt personally, internally, but were unable to process in the thickness of La Jolla I could see and experience symbolically in the desert. It wasn't a vacation I was seeking but a headspace I was mimicking and therefore able to articulate.

But the images themselves seemed to be vacant in a way that betrayed the intensity of emotion I felt while shooting them. So I put the negatives in a box and started writing. Getting critical distance from the distance I had taken.

Writing helped. Writing helped me find the linkages between my methods of coping personally – currently, historically – and my methods of relating to others – currently, historically. This process began while I was alone, single, more guarded than ever. Very much in my own head. It continued as I entered a new relationship. What is intimacy in the aftermath of abuse? Not in the abstract but in the real, actual, curled up naked next to someone sense? What does it mean to have a *lover*? What are the boundaries of that terminology?

I'm still guarded, but not like before. Much of what I wrote for *Space Travel* was before I let anyone into the questions I was asking. It was a step I hadn't made, a part I hadn't processed. Doing so enabled me to open the box back up and start sifting through the negatives.

---

<sup>25</sup> Réage, Pauline. *The Story of O*. Translated by Sabine D'Estrée. (New York, NY: Ballantine, 1965).

- - -

Walead Beshty told me that landscape inherently evokes colonialism, but I think he's an idiot. He spent 45 minutes explaining to me the male privilege oozing out of Eggleston, Shore, the entire *New Topographics* movement.<sup>26</sup> Its background in painting. Toxic masculinity. What he failed to notice was that in doing so – and in imposing these filters over all landscapes, landscape-oriented artists, my work and myself – he was perpetuating notions that white men *own* a certain kind of image, and that I had no business working with it. But I do.

I used Eggleston's *Guide* as a layout – a template, really – because I knew it worked. They were color. They were landscapes. But they weren't me.

Tarah Krajnak advised me to find the *opposite* of Eggleston, which took some thought, trial and error.<sup>27</sup> What *is* the opposite of Eggleston? Is it Goldin? I find Goldin's work, however teeming with *subjectivity* and *intimacy*, to be just as colonial, just as banal and conventional. I wouldn't find the opposite in the *Aperture* magazine darlings, the conventions of the '70s, '80s. I was the opposite that hadn't yet been expressed.

I went with a layout of 9 inches wide by 18 inches long, which when opened creates a square. The size allows me to play with image size and relationships between images on both the x and y axis. No 'bobble', no sing-song cadence or general musical accompaniment. Text, however, is interspersed, and is the only element anchored to a time and location. In choosing the cover, I returned to the desert, and sought something with a color and texture that

---

<sup>26</sup> Off-handed reference to Stephen Shore, my photographic idol and inspiration for many years. I met him in 2010. Never meet your heroes. I fear meeting Woody Allen would be much the same. Avoid at all costs.

<sup>27</sup> Tarah Krajnak, photographer born in Lima, Peru and based in Los Angeles, CA.

resembled dirt in the Winter. I decided on a linen cover with debossed photograph, inspired (ironically) by John Berger's *Portraits*.<sup>28</sup>

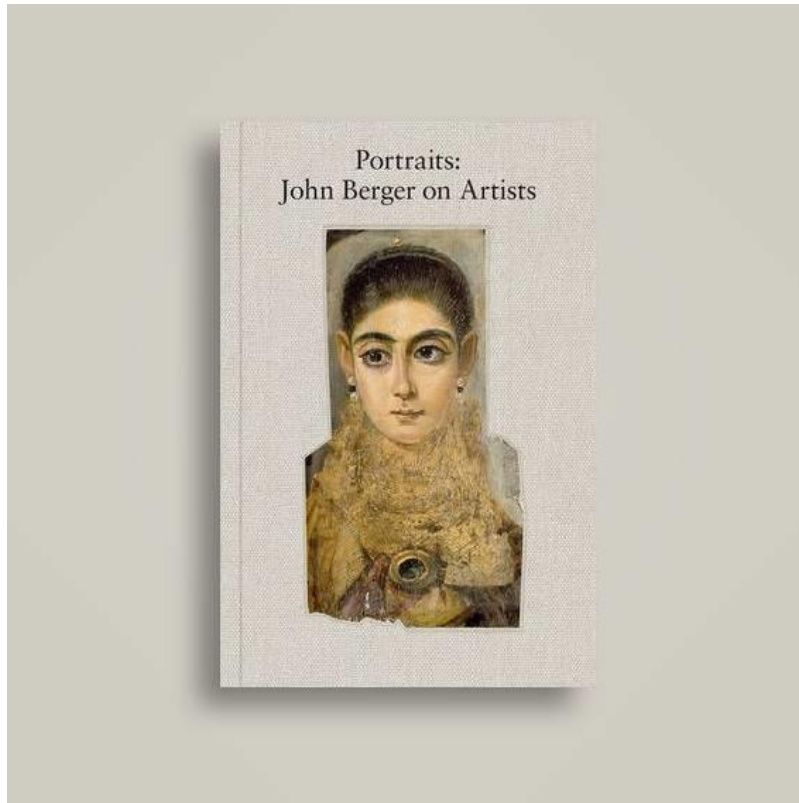


Figure 8: Cover of John Berger's *Portraits*

John Szarkowski's dead, so he won't write my foreword. Which is fine. He wouldn't have, anyway. Given the choice, would I even ask him to? More than ever in my life it feels imperative to be in dialogue with men – hence my committee, hence the majority of my colleagues. Perhaps the real issue, then, is the need for new voices, new discussions in order for a dialogue of substance to occur. This is a lesson for myself moving forward – a cliché

---

<sup>28</sup> Berger, John. *Portraits*. Edited by Tom Overton. (New York, NY: Verso, 2015).



about old dogs and new tricks keeps circling my head. The canon is there to be revered and then dismantled, with something new formed from the scraps.

Or perhaps dismantling is enough. Eventually all of it – the old dogs, the canon – winds up with everything else, tattered and faded on the side of the road.

## WORKS CITED

- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1981).
- Clark, Larry. *Tulsa*. (New York, NY: Lustrum Press, 1971).
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*. (New York, NY: G. Braziller, 1971).
- Eggleston, William. *William Eggleston's Guide*. (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 1976).
- Ghent, Emmanuel, MD. "Masochism, Submission, Surrender1—Masochism as a Perversion of Surrender." *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 26 (1990): 108-36.
- Goldin, Nan. *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. Edited by Marvin Heiferman, Mark Holborn, and Suzanne Fletcher. (New York, NY: Aperture Foundation, 1986).
- Winnicott, Donald Woods. "Fear of Breakdown." *International Review of Psycho-analysis* 1 (1974): 103-07.